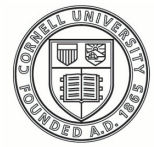

Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 16
Organizing for Health & Safety

Article 9

1990

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Abstract

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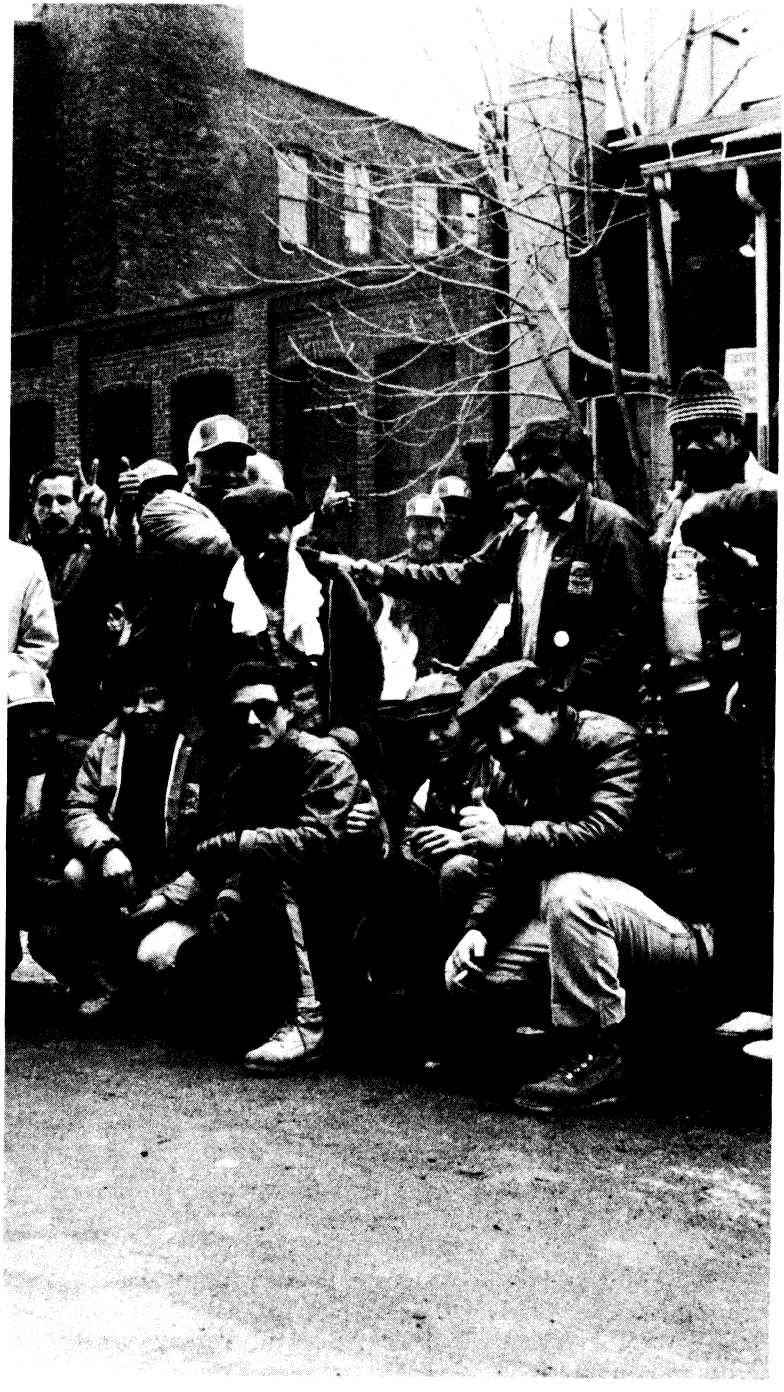
Keywords

Uretek, Connecticut, working conditions, ILG



ILG Organizing Sweatshops

■ *An interview with Danny Perez, ILG Organizer*

"Uretek" has become sort of a legend among union health and safety activists. It has all the elements of a good labor story—working conditions you wouldn't believe unless and until you saw them, a struggle that combined a strike by severely exploited workers with a wide array of tactics that eventually grabbed the attention of the entire state of Connecticut, and a clear-cut victory for both the workers and for health-and-safety activism in New England.

It also included an incident that illustrates the direct connection between occupational health and safety and environmental health.

Sixty workers at Uretek Co. had been on strike for weeks back in 1987 over preserving their health. More than half the workforce had hepatitis or other liver ailments. As the strike kept people out of work, and away from the dimethyl formamide (DMF) that was causing their deteriorated health, many people's conditions began to improve. That was to be expected. But what was surprising was that new cases of hepatitis and other ailments were developing among the strikers. Others, after responding to initial treatment, regressed.

Danny Perez, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILG) organizer at Uretek, tells the reason: workshoes, which workers kept wearing during the strike, were coated with DMF. And this stuff was continuing to make workers sick. They were

bringing this pollutant right into their own homes. When workers got rid of their shoes, they got rid of their hepatitis, headaches, dizziness and liver ailments.

Perez, responding to a tip he got from a social worker, had begun investigating conditions at the Uretek plant in New Haven in February 1987. What he found were sick workers working 12-hour shifts, standing on a concrete floor with no scheduled breaks and eating lunch while tending their machines surrounded by toxic substances. Ten of the workers had been officially diagnosed as having noninfectious hepatitis and 20 more had been diagnosed with other liver problems, but everybody had some kind of health problem—rashes, headaches, dizziness.

A couple days of talking with the workers, and Perez had them out on strike. At the same time he alerted OSHA to the situation, and contacted the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the city and the state Departments of Health, and the local media. The majority Hispanic workforce picketed the plant as Uretek tried to keep operating. With sympathetic media coverage, the Uretek strike attracted a lot of supporters—neighbors concerned about pollution from the Uretek plant, Latino community activists, the mayors of New Haven and Bridgeport, and even the state attorney general.

Perez led the strike and related public campaign before the workers at Uretek had officially voted to be represented by the ILG. That didn't happen until May 5, when the ILG won a representation election 10 weeks after the strike began.

By the end of May, the workers ratified their first union contract with Uretek—a contract that provided health insurance and that immediately increased wages $1-an-hour with another 90 cents coming in the next two years (from an average of $4.50 an hour to $6.40). The contract also included an array of health-and-safety provisions—including mandatory protective equipment and training, regular medical screening for workers, and a union right to periodic inspections.

During the course of the strike, OSHA and the DEP forced Uretek to clean up its act. OSHA levied $480,000 in fines for 179 violations of the OSH Act—the highest any company in New England had ever been fined. And, after facing jail terms through action initiated by the DEP, Uretek's top officers agreed to install $300,000 worth of anti-pollution equipment to abate the DMF, which it uses to coat fabric at its New Haven plant.

The Uretek strike also succeeded in raising consciousness in Connecticut and much of the rest of New England about deteriorating occupational safety and health and other working con-

ditions—particularly for minority and immigrant workers.

Danny Perez, ILG organizing director in Connecticut, has been organizing throughout the state for a number of years now, and he finds health and safety a primary issue in most of his organizing campaigns. With the assistance of Melinda Tuhus, a reporter for the *New Haven Advocate,* LRR interviewed Perez this summer.

LRR: Why do you think organizing around health and safety is so important now? Have conditions deteriorated or are workers just more conscious of these issues?

Perez: Both. Workers themselves have identified health and safety as the Number One issue. Workers wonder if they are going to come home in the same condition they went to work. Vietnam was safer for a soldier than the workplaces of America are for American workers. A conservative estimate is that there are 100,000 work-related deaths each year.

Health and safety is an extremely strong issue right now. With the economy being what it is, with the manufacturing base breaking up in this country, cities and states around the country are desperate to retain what manufacturing they have, and they're really turning their backs on the conditions in which employees exist.

Health and safety is something of interest to the workers, but also to the media. When workers go out on strike for wages, unions are often criticized—unfairly—"All you want is money." When we focus on health and safety, we do better with getting the media to focus on the horror stories of what is going on in some of these places.

Another thing. There was a question asked in an AFL-CIO poll. The question was: "Do you think an employer should have the right in a strike situation to replace the strikers permanently?" 60% said the employer should have that right. Now, they asked the same question but they were more specific. They said something like: "Do you think an employer should have the right to replace workers permanently if it is a health-and-safety strike?" And 100% of respondents said no. So, 60% felt the employer could do any goddamn thing he wants, including replacing permanently striking workers, but 100% said NOT if it's a health-and-safety strike.

LRR: At Uretek before the union came in, half the workforce of 60 had hepatitis and other liver ailments. How bad were things, and how are they now?

Perez: The conditions were horrible, but I don't want to dwell

on it. The company has lived up to the contract. There are 22 pages of health and safety language. The owner testified at the state legislature that the contract has been good in protecting their workers and they can live with it. They saw the writing on the wall. They understood the ILG is not out to hang them—we just wanted to make Uretek a safe place to work.

LRR: There are a number of elements in the Uretek campaign we'd like to ask you about. Let's start with OSHA. Unlike many other situations we know, OSHA seems to have acted pretty effectively at Uretek. Why was that? Did you do something to light a fire under them?

Perez: Precisely. But in criticizing OSHA we have to be careful in criticizing the local OSHA people that have no control over national OSHA policy. As an example, if Hartford's OSHA office needs 15 industrial hygienists to do its job and it's only got 3, then the criticism has to be laid on the OSHA administation in Washington—the Republican administration that has decimated OSHA. So, we have to be careful who we're criticizing here because in Connecticut I believe that the local OSHA people are doing the very best they can with what they've got.

LRR: So, all that was necessary was for you to inform the local OSHA? Were there other things you did?

Perez: Well, you have to remember that a lot of organizers don't know how to utilize OSHA. They think you can get on the phone and say, "Hey, this is happening in such-and-such a place and we want you to investigate." It doesn't work that way. The most effective way to get OSHA off its duff is to take workers down there and have workers sign an affidavit, a complaint, that the conditions where they work are dangerous and unsafe—and, in particular, that workers are getting sick, workers are having serious accidents there. Now, once you do that, OSHA has to react. Whether they have two people or 500 people, they've got to respond to that. And, if they don't, then you have the media. You can go to the media and say, "This is happening in such-and-such a place and we went to such-and-such an agency, and such-and-such an agency has not responded, or ignored us." Let me tell you something. If you understand the media, the media has an insatiable appetite for information. And that's information. That's a story.

LRR: How did the state's Department of Environmental Protection get involved?

. . . Danny Perez talking with Uretek workers.

Perez: We had called the various regulatory people in Connecticut. And, don't forget, this is now front-page stuff in Connecticut, and it's on television practically every night. And the local politicians are now, during an election year in Connecticut, extremely concerned about what's happening in their area. And, with all this background, when you call the regulatory people, they respond very quickly.

And, on top of that, the attorney general—now U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman—called me and said he was arranging a meeting with the mayor of New Haven and all the regulatory agencies, and he invited me to that meeting. So, now we have the attorney general responding to the crisis, we have the local mayor going to the attorney general for help, and the attorney general has on the carpet all the regulatory people, and is asking, "What the hell is going on here." So, when you get support at that level, and you get the media responding to a crisis that's not supposed to happen in 20th Century America, you know, the shit hits the fan, things start to happen.

LRR: The strike got a lot of community support. How did that come about?

Perez: Because the community was involved in this also. I mean there was some test-taking—soil samples taken—in the community, in the immediate area, and there was some contamination in the soil. Plus, we, the ILG, went to community meetings, churches and homes, and we kept the communities involved as to not only what the ILG was doing, but what the regulatory people were saying, what they were finding, and what they were

doing. And we made recommendations to these community groups as to what action they could take.

LRR: The Uretek strike was not economic. It was an unfair labor practice (ULP) strike, which meant the strikers could not be permanently replaced. What was the ULP—the health conditions in the plant?

Perez: No, that's not a ULP. The ULP was that after my visits to the plant in the evenings got to management, management—as they normally do—went around threatening workers with dismissal or even closing the plant down if the union came into Uretek. Now, that's protected activity, and the law says the employer has no right to do that. We can't force the union on workers, and the employer can't prevent workers from forming their own union—that's a God-given right in this country.

LRR: But you purposely waited until an unfair labor practice was committed in order to make it a ULP strike?

Perez: You don't have to wait! You don't have to wait for an unfair labor practice. The employers automatically do it. It happens. It happens the first day the employer finds out the union is involved in organizing its workers.

LRR: At one point during the strike, you organized a demonstration at Uretek's owner's home in a fancy suburb. Does that kind of stuff really have any impact?

Perez: Of course it does. It was probably the most difficult thing to do, I mean for me personally, to go to someone's home. But this guy was not responding to phone calls, this guy was ignoring our pleas to sit down to try to find some common ground by which we could resolve this serious health problem that existed. Since he didn't come to us, we decided to go to him.

When we strike a company, we're telling the employer: "You don't give a damn about what our workers take home. We're going to show you that we don't care about what we take to your house. To take a demonstration to your house is to let you know how we feel when your irresponsible decisions cause problems in our homes."

LRR: You took the workers at Uretek out on strike before they were members of the union. Was that just an organizing tactic in this particular situation or does it reflect your basic philosophy of organizing?

Perez: That decision was made as much to save those workers

from further health problems as it was a strategic decision to protect their rights.

LRR: You've been quoted as being critical of a "hot shop," hit-and-run approach to organizing, contrasting it to a long-term, community-oriented approach. But Uretek sure as hell was a hot shop, wasn't it? How is your approach different from the traditional one?

Perez: Well, I don't think that the labor movement in this country can make the impact that it was destined to make unless we start involving ourselves with the entire community. By that I mean the churches, for example. I mean, look at the black churches in this country. Where have most of the black leaders come from? Where did Malcolm X come from? Where did Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson come from? Churches. The labor movement has to start getting involved with the workforce outside of the workplace.

You've got to be there for people, regardless of whether you're organizing them or not. That's the philosophy of the International Ladies Garment Workers. We feel that we're the advocate for union and nonunion workers. You don't have to be a do-gooder to be upset over a place that has reckless management that causes accidents that kill their employees. I think it's the responsibility of all working people, union or nonunion, to get involved in a shop like that and to do something about it. To do that, you have to network in the community, you have to be involved in the community, you have to know the movers, the people that create change. You have to live with these people so that when you have to organize an effort, you can do it.

For example, you can't go up to a newspaper reporter and say, "Hey, I got this story" and he doesn't know who the hell he's talking to. You should know that guy, you should have a relationship with him, you should have a few beers with him, you should know his family, he should know your family. He should know a lot about you so that when you tell him that you got something important you want to talk about, he'll take you seriously. And the same thing for community leaders.

Uretek involved everybody. My essential point is that when the union is up against the company on its own, it's going to lose. At Uretek everybody was involved—the attorney general, the mayor, mayors from other towns, the people who lived in the area, the churches, all the regulatory people. So this company was up against the entire society almost. This was not just a labor dispute. This was society, or the community, trying to right a wrong, collectively.

LRR: You organize mostly Hispanic workers. Is there a correlation between a mostly-minority workforce and terrible working conditions?

Perez: I have yet to go any place in Connecticut where I see a dirty, filthy building, with 55-gallon chemical drums all over the place, where I don't find immigrant workers, undocumented workers.

LRR: Are undocumented workers harder to organize, for fear of being deported if they speak up?

Perez: Not necessarily. Undocumented workers will strike because they have a labor history in their country. You go into any shop with *Chilenos* and they will organize the shop for you. They have a strong history and consciousness.

LRR: What about Puerto Ricans, who are the largest Hispanic group in Connecticut, and who are U.S. citizens?

Perez: There are three kinds of Puerto Ricans—the one who was born here, who grew up here and who will die here, and who gets involves in what's happening here, like me; the one who was born in Puerto Rico, and will live and die there, and gets involved in what's happening there; and the one who lives in an airplane [going back and forth]. He is the most difficult to get involved in struggles. They are tourists. We want them to get involved and participate.

LRR: You've been focusing lately on Acme, another plant in New Haven with a largely Hispanic workforce, where a worker was killed last year.

Perez: We lost an election there by one vote three or four years ago. I pedicted there would be a serious accident. Norberto Miranda died. [State Rep. and candidate for attorney general] Jay Levin called it murder. He called for an investigation by the state attorney general and the U.S. attorney.

LRR: Where's that campaign at now?

Perez: It's stalled simply because it's up to the workers. It's their campaign, it's their decision to make, and it's their fight. I'm not the one that's suffering there. And for some workers, the workers we're attempting to organize, it's extremely difficult to find work, extremely difficult to change jobs or seek new employment. And while the pay at Acme is not all that bad, the working conditions are. And the worker who's unskilled and doesn't have a lot of

formal education will trade off, sometimes, that higher pay for health and safety—until it just gets to be so intolerable that they'll respond.

At Acme I talked myself blue in the face. Some of those workers are making 11 bucks an hour, and they cannot make that anyplace else. And, on top of that they've done enormous things to that place since our campaign, which benefits the workers. They've put [safety] guards on everything, they've had all kinds of consultants come in there, safety engineers and all that. Which is fine, as long as the place gets better. We would like to organize it, but at least they can no longer operate the way they were.

LRR: You've also got a campaign now at Hartford Feance, a procelain manufacturer. Is health and safety a major issue there too?

Perez: Yes, it was and OSHA responded. In all these campaigns OSHA has responded. And there's not a place that OSHA goes that we're not involved with, not a place where they levy citations on the company—as they did at Hartford Feance—that we're not active. And we were successful in organizing that shop. Feance is now an International Ladies Garment Workers shop.

LRR: Conditions in the garment industry and in other labor-intensive industries have really deteriorated in the last 10 years. Sweatshops, child labor, homework—conditions we thought were "history" in this country. What needs to happen in order to reverse directions?

Perez: Workers are practically brain-dead in this country. No one knows what their rights are. After the shaft they are getting, you have to think one of two things: They are immune to pain, or they don't give a damn. The ladder of success is bullshit. Twenty years ago minimum wage was $1.60. If you went to the store today to buy what you could for that [then], you'd need $7. In Japan the differences between a factory worker and top management in salary is like 8-to-1. In this country, it's gone to 93-to-1.

There's been this tremendous shift in wealth in this country, which almost makes it impossible today for a factory worker to own a home—can you imagine that? I've been in shops where people work three jobs. The system has learned to keep a very fine balance between starvation and anarchy, to keep you just above the line where you can just barely survive. We have to stop work in this country for just one day to remind Congress that we exist, that we are still around, that we are somebody. ■